Living in the Spirit of Non-self

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on December 16, 1999 in Plum Village, France.

Dear Friends, today is the 16th December, 99 and we are in the New Hamlet. We know how important it is to practice taking Refuge in the Sangha. In order to have a Sangha we should learn how to build one and the best way to build one is to learn to live in harmony with the Sangha in the spirit of non self. So building a Sangha also means living with the Sangha. If you are lucky to be born in a family where everyone considers themselves as practitioners, Buddhist practitioners, you may like to transform your family into a small Sangha, practicing with Buddhist terminology and so on. But if you do not have the fortune of being born in a family where everyone accepts the way of life of Buddhism, then you may like to build a Sangha also, but not with Buddhist terminology, rituals and so on. It is possible to convince everyone to adapt to art of mindful living. To me, all Buddhist terms can be translated into non-Buddhist terms. We have been very successful in doing so. When you study the Five Mindfulness Trainings you don't see the words Buddha, Dharma, Sangha in it and the Five Mindfulness Trainings are in plain, secular language.

When you say, I take Refuge in the Buddha, it sounds Buddhist. But if you say, I have confidence in my capacity of being mindful, of being awake. I trust in my capacity of being there, in the here and the now. I trust my capacity of being understanding and compassionate. That is the equivalent of, 'I take Refuge in the Buddha', I trust Buddahood in me, I trust my capacity of waking up, of being able to live in the here and the now. So it is entirely possible for you to use non-Buddhist language in order to express the insight and the practice of Buddhism. So even if your son, your daughter, does not like Buddhism you can still offer them the art of mindful living. That can bring a lot of happiness to you and to your family, transforming your family into a Sangha. You don't call it a Sangha, just a family, where everyone knows how to live in such a way that communication is possible, joy and peace become possible.

The people in the Lower Hamlet or in the New Hamlet may have noticed the way the monastics, the nuns, here take care of the subas who came from Vietnam. Some of you may think that they give too much care to the subas but that is their practice in the tradition. We take care of our senior teachers in such a way because that is not only taking care of them but taking care of ourselves. And when you take care of your teacher that way, your senior teachers that way, you have an opportunity to express your love and appreciation and yet you get a lot. Maybe the people who are being taken care of don't get as much as you do because by doing so you show your compassion, your appreciation, your love, your care and it is you who profits the most from your act. And so happiness is not an individual matter. You make the other person happy and then happiness will return to you, like this, right away.

Suppose you go home and take care of your mother the way the nuns here take care of the superior nuns. Not as a duty, but as something you like to do. You know you are a continuation of your mother and you would like to take care of your mother inside of you and around you. Just take care like that, and that is not a loss of time; that is not losing your time, your time is to do that. Expressing love in concrete terms, and then you see that you are the person who is happy because you have the insight that your mother is you. You are just the continuation of your mother and making your mother happy it means making yourself happy. So I don't think that nuns in the New Hamlet are thinking that is a duty they have to do because the subas have come from Vietnam and they have to treat them with utmost care. That is just their tradition, the practice, and when you practice like that you are happy. And why don't we do that with our father, our mother, senior members of our family. If we take care of them like that, they will see that you are them and they are you, non-discrimination,

and suddenly your family becomes a Sangha because we have to remember always that happiness is not an individual thing.

And that we can see in many things, as we observe in our body there are so many cells! The cells in our body operate not on the base of duty but they just enjoy operating like that. The lungs are doing their best in order to renew the blood. With the intake of oxygen they do not say, “You the blood, you need me in order to be red again, to be oxygenated again, and you have to be thankful to me.” Lungs never think like that! It is their pleasure to breathe in and breathe out and offer oxygen to the blood cells. And the blood cells, they go back to the other cells and they release the oxygen and they release their nutriments, and they don’t say, “Well we traveled a lot in the body in order to bring you oxygen and you should be grateful to me! I have done too much, now it is time for me to retire.” The blood cells don’t think like that, they just enjoy doing that. There is no discrimination at all in our body and we see that the insight of non-self, the insight of interbeing can be seen just by observing how the cells in our body operate. If you are a scientist observing the way the human body operates, you can see very well that everything is operating on the insight of non-self, non-discrimination and that every cell of your body has the wisdom of non-discrimination.
When you observe a beehive, you see the same thing. You don’t see a chief, a boss directing things. You be number one and you do this for me, and you be number two and you have to go in that direction and get that pollen for me. There is no chief at all, there is no director. The queen bee is not a director, she is not the king, she is not really the queen, her duty is just to offer the eggs for the next generation of bees, she is not really a directress. And yet in the beehive every bee behaves perfectly and they don’t have to tell each other how they do it. The way they live their daily lives, the way they live, the way they act is their message, and they continue to communicate by the way they are and the way they do things. Sometimes a bee will go back to the beehive and begin to dance. That is their own way of expressing to the other bees, indicating the direction where they can get more pollen - the dance of the bees.
Also, if you observe the termites, you see that they are wonderful. They always work as a team, they don’t have a director either and the queen of the termites also has only one duty; to produce eggs for the next generation of termites. They are very talented workers. They even create air conditioners in the place where they live. They are organized perfectly and there is a lot of intelligence, a lot of wisdom in the way the bees and the termites organize their community. No-one gives any orders at all and communications go very well.

Termites do communicate with each other and bees also communicate very well with each other. Scientists notice that there are chemicals that radiate from each individual termite as means of communications. Not only chemicals, but the way termites move around and perform an act is considered to be a means of communication. And all other termites, all other bees are open to receive this kind of information and they just act, responding in a perfect way. No one needs to tell the other one you should behave like this or like that. There’s harmony that you can see among the termites and among the bees, and scientists who observe them marvel at the way they operate. And now there’s a science called neuroscience, they study the brain and the neuroscientists have discovered very much the same thing. There is no self, there is no chief, there is no director operating in the brain, there is only individual brain cells called neurons. When scientists look deeply into the way neurons act, they see that neurons communicate with each other very well. The individual neuron is linked to all other neurons in the brain so that communication can happen all the time and neurons are responding to each other in a very harmonious way and they don’t need a director, they don’t need a boss telling them what to do.
So, if you want to build a good Sangha, an ideal Sangha we just observe our body, we just observe the termites, we just observe the bees, we just observe the neurons and we know the best way to do it.

One of the attendants of the senior nuns reported to Thay that one day there were a team of two attendants and one sister is five or six years older than the other. The young attendant just looked at her big sisters and observed her and suddenly she knew what to do and what not to do because maybe there is more than one thing to do at the same time in order to make the senior nuns happy. So just observing, allow yourself to be in the place, to be penetrated by the information and then you naturally know what to do in order to complete the other's actions. And you don't need the other to tell you what to do, you just know what needs to be done at this moment and then the two attendants without any communication act together as a team. No one giving orders to the other, and the situation becomes perfect. No words needed, no order needed, just be there and become one with the whole situation and you know what to do and what not to do for harmony to reign. It is very interesting. There is no thinking needed, no pre-arrangement needed, no preparation needed, you just allow yourself to be there, to be mindful of the situation and then naturally you know what to do and what not to do to make the senior nuns happy and to make you happy also. It is like a piece of music, like a symphony, without a conductor.

The human brain is the most sophisticated thing that we can observe. There are so many neurons in it, billions of them, and yet harmony reigns in the brain. Suppose you are a New Yorker and you live with ten million other New Yorkers and you want to have a connection with all the other New Yorkers. Suppose you provide yourself with ten million strings and you tie one string onto yourself and one string to another New Yorker, and you do like that ten million times in order for you to be connected to all other New Yorkers. And each New Yorker will do the same thing like you. Each New Yorker will have ten million strings in order to be connected with other New Yorkers. Let us suppose that New York is ten times bigger, that is the situation of the brain, one neuron is in communication with all the other neurons. The neurons have impulses in them, they want to express, they want to communicate, they want to do something. And in every individual cell of the brain there is a kind of impulse, they fire electric impulses from themselves and all the other cells of the brain receive them. The neuroscientists have measured that the speed of these electrical impulses fired by each neuron is 400 km an hour and in one fraction of one second they fire again. Communication is permanent and all the other neurons receive the information permanently. In one second there are several times when electrical impulses are fired from one neuron to another or other neurons and that is why communication is always going on.

In a Sangha, if we want the communication to continue we should open ourselves. We should learn the art of communication. We communicate by the way we walk, the way we wish dishes, the way we look at our brother or sister. We can communicate in many ways, we don't have to use chemicals, like the termites, because our thought, our body and our speech they are energies, they are equivalent to chemicals because chemicals they are energy anyway. So every thought we have in our minds can be expressed in our way of looking, in our way of acting, so we communicate always. If the communication does not reach you it is because you are blocked somehow. Your practice is to unblock yourself for the communication of the members of the Sangha to reach you.

The scientists have tried many ways to understand the way the brain would operate. Suppose they play music, they play Beethoven and then they observe how the cells in the brain respond to the rhythm and to the music. Every note. They observe that zones in the brain suddenly light up and on the other side, another area of the brain lights up and there is a continuation of oscillation, back and forth like that. They operate exactly like a symphony and without any conductor. And one moment of music, one note, comes together like this. And you don't see anything, there is nothing organized that you can see. So it becomes very organized, expressing like that and suddenly it is completely unglued, dissolves, you don't see anything and the next moment it comes up like this and total harmony will be seen again.

One of the four conditions we have learned, the previous moment of consciousness has opened the way for the next moment of consciousness and the base is always there in order to hold everything. It is perfectly organized in harmony and suddenly there is nothing,

everything is disorganized and yet the next moment it will be reorganized in a perfect way again, and in the meantime alaya vijnana is holding all the seeds. If the first moment of consciousness has not happened, how could the second moment of consciousness take this? One moment of manifestation, one moment of emanation, today they like the word emanation, they don't use the word manifestation, emanation is the same thing: everything is an emanation of alaya vijnana, store consciousness.

So there must be a base, the root consciousness from which elements will come together in a very, very natural way, without any conductor, any self, expressing like that and then dissolving like that as if there were no organization at all. And again, it comes up, manifested again and scientists see very clearly that there is no self in the brain, no conductor, and they witness to the fact, to the insight of no self in the brain, there is no self. And scientists today say, what we can do to help you, my Buddhists friends, is to put a stamp on the teaching of non-self because science has proven that there is no self. We cannot do more than that, they said.

That is true because so many of them have witnessed to the insight, to the truth of no self. Our scientists, neuroscientists and even psychologists and sociologists they have all discovered the truth of non self. They can write, they can speak, they can testify to the truth of non self but they are still unable to live up to the truth of non self. So after having got out of their lab they go home and continue to live as their self, and they behave with their families and with their friends as if they had not see the truth of non self.

That is happening in the last years of the twentieth century. It is happening right now that scientists have discovered the truth of non self, of interbeing, of the nature of interconnectedness. They can testify to that truth, but they are not able to live that truth yet because they have not found ways in order to implement that insight into their daily life.

Many of is in the Buddhist Institute we do the same: we come to the classroom, we listen to our teacher about non self and interconnectedness. We believe, we have faith, in that teaching and yet when we go back to our brothers and sisters we don't apply very much the insight of non self. We get angry, we still get jealous and so on. We are not capable of behaving like the bees or the termites or the neurons or the cells in the body and our practice is to rely on the Sangha in order to be able to do so. Sangha building relies on us and in order to be a good Sangha builder we should see the truth of non self. We should see the truth of interbeing and we should come together to find ways in order to implement the insight of non self and impermanence in our way of doing things in the Sangha. And that is what we have been trying to do, that makes us different from the scientists.

We are not satisfied with the insight of non self, we want to live the insight of non self, that is why when we organize a retreat, we organize in such a way that everyone of us behaves like a bee. We don't need a director, we don't want to be ordered about. If we don't want to be ordered about, the only alternative is to open ourselves to see what is really going on, so that we would know what to do and what not to do in order for the organization to be perfect. So, when you organize a retreat for your friends, suppose you want to organize a retreat for business people. That is an opportunity for you to come together and learn the way to operate like a community of bees, a community of termites, a community of cells, a community of neurons, because in truth, reality functions like that, on the base of non self, on the base of interbeing.

In our century, the century which is ending, is characterized by individualism. We no longer believe in the family. The family structure has been shut down because we follow the cult of the individual. We want only to do things that make us feel good, only to satisfy our private desire. We don't care about the family, we don't care about the church, we don't care about society, we follow just the order of the self.

They tell us that we have to go Vietnam and fight the Communists. They tell us that according to the domino theory if you cannot stop communism in Vietnam then communism will take over the world. But going to Vietnam and dying in the jungle in Vietnam is not something we feel good about. So we resist the war, we resist going to Vietnam. At

Christmas time, instead of talking in terms of love, going home to our families and people and laughing like Santa Claus, ho, ho, ho. We say, we won't go; ho, ho, ho, we won't go, we won't go to Vietnam, because going to Vietnam and dying - that does not feel good. So the young people come together and resist. They have come together to resist not because they are compassionate, they care about the life of the Vietnamese, but because going to the jungle in Vietnam and dying there does not feel good. Therefore they rally people to resist the war and resist the war not for the sake of compassion but because the war doesn't belong to us. The war is yours, your generation wants this war, we the young people do not want this war because we don't feel good about this war.

So the peace movement was not based on a humanitarian idea, but just resisting the old generation and the ideas of the old generation. The peace movement was based on the cult of the self, that is why it was not a real peace movement. That is what happened during the sixties. If you have gone through that period, please sit down and look back. Resistance to the war was rather an egoistic act and not really a compassionate one. That is why there was so much anger, so much hatred in the peace movement. When I was there calling for stopping the bombing, many people said, "We don't want to stop the bombing, we want America to be defeated", because they were so angry. The defeat of America was their aim, but as a person who represented millions of people who died under the bombs I only wanted to see something very concrete, right away for people to stop the suffering right away, the cessation of the bombing, now, right away. And the peace movement said, no, we don't want a cessation of the bombing, we want only American withdrawal, we want only a defeat of America and they were not able to understand. Because stopping the bombing first and then arranging for other things would be more realistic.

I was working with people trying to stop the war in Vietnam, and I had a lot of contact with people in the peace movement. And the young people in the sixties, many of them operated on the base of self, not on the base of compassion, of understanding.

If it feels good, do it, that was the motto of the young generation. And also in context of the war they would say, make love, not war, remember? Because, make love, it feels good, make war, it doesn't feel good. And that is why our century, at least the second half of our century was characterized by the cult of the self: the small self, the atomized self. We only care about ourselves, care about the fame and the wealth and consumption by the self. Individualism has reached its highest point in the second half of the twentieth century. Now the young people have grown up, they got married, they have jobs and many have important positions in the Government. The scandals they produce which make us suffer also come from that tradition, that habit energy of serving the self.

Let us look deeply into the situation of Mr. Clinton and his family. Clinton was a youngster during the sixties, he also went to the streets manifesting against the war; intelligent, active. Unlike John F. Kennedy, he is operating on another base. John F. Kennedy was still very Catholic. What happened during the reign of Mr. Clinton? The scandal that went on, and on, and on, to the point that we had the desire to vomit, was the result of such a situation. Look on Mr. Clinton, look on the situation of his family, look at his spiritual background. We can discover a lot concerning the situation of the young generation that came out of the second half of the twentieth century.

Now people no longer believe in their church, in their spiritual tradition, people don't have a family that is solid, they don't believe in the family any more. When you don't believe in the family you cannot build a family. You don't have happiness in the family, you feel that happiness is possible only when you seek for fame and power and wealth. The happiness lies in the capacity of consuming. It is very clear and many people in the third world begin to imitate the West. In China, in Vietnam, in other countries, people have abandoned their spiritual tradition. They don't believe in Buddhism any more. They are looking for consumption. They want to buy the most sophisticated audio-video equipment, they want to

consume portable telephones, faxes, color television and so on. And that is the meaning of their lives, to consume, to satisfy private desires. Private desires, in Vietnamese.

This is the situation we are in when the twentieth century is ending, the cult of the self. Individualism that has created a lot of suffering. Drugs, alcohol, aids, destruction of the family structure, no spiritual life, mental illness; all these characterize the second half of our century. We have a few weeks in order to do the work of self examination, the examination of our century.

We are to embark on a new century very soon, in two weeks. We should use our time to practice looking deeply. What our elders have done, how they have lived their lives and how we live our lives now, what we have done. Looking deeply. Every day give yourself one hour, two hours, doing sitting or walking, in order to look back at yourself and at our situation. We want to begin anew, we want a different kind of direction for the twenty first century, we don't want to continue this. Because this would be the continuation of our destruction and the destruction of other species. We want to take another direction.

We don't want to follow the direction of individualism, we don't want to continue in the direction of the cult of the self. We want to live in harmony, in the spirit of non self, in the spirit of interbeing. We don't want to follow the cult of self any more. The Sangha is our direction. Sangha building is the most noble task that we do, and Sangha would be the refuge for all of us in the next century. In order for the Sangha to be built we have to unblock ourselves, in order for information to come to us. Like the bees, they are capable of receiving information from other bees. Like the cells in our bodies, they are capable of knowing what to do and what not to do in order for harmony in the body to reign.

We want to behave like cells in our brain. They are in permanent communication with one another, they don't need a conductor, they don't need a director, they don't need a self. The insight is there and even science has testified to the value of the insight. What remains to do is to come together and try our best to live that insight. And the Buddha has offered so many ways to implement that insight into our daily life for us to suffer less, for us not to make the other person next to us suffer. And that is the very basic task of Sangha building.

The message I sent out on the 4th, called New Century Message, contains some of the things I have just shared with you. I would like each of you to have one copy to use as an instrument for the practice of looking deeply, looking back at ourselves, at our situation, at our century in order to know what direction we must take beginning with the twenty first century.

The Vietnamese version has been sent to Vietnam on the 4th of December. We don't have the text in French yet but Thay Doji will do it soon. I have four sets in English and I think I will give one for each hamlet. This is an instrument for us to practice deep looking and there will be a lot of friends coming for Christmas and for New Year. I think we have to offer each of them one copy. The moment when they arrive we should invite them to read the message and to reflect on it. Everyone should have one hour or two at least every day in order to do the work of looking deeply, and that is the practice of beginning anew. We have to look deeply in order to know what stop. What we should not do any more, what we should not continue any more, in order to open up a new area for us and for our children.

Looking deeply is our job, the only thing that is worthwhile to do while being in Plum Village is to practice looking deeply. On the 31st of December Thay will give a Dharma talk at five o'clock in the afternoon, and the message will be something like the message in this Dharma talk, with more details and with an invitation for us to reflect upon.

Any of you has been a citizen of Woodstock nation? Any of you were in Woodstock?

.